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ABSTRACT

While the perceived role of television may differ considerably from its actual function, such perception plays an important part in determining individual response. First-year college students' opinions of the personal and social contributions of television were measured in a survey using students in a basic speech class. Students thought television did a good job in providing entertainment and stimulating interest in public problems. Their major criticisms were that television commercials discouraged understanding of political issues and encouraged the development of false standards of social behavior. They also thought commercials aroused demand for unnecessary products. Some students believed that television offered too easy an opportunity for escapism. The statements concerning the utility of television to improve personal and family social norms received little support. (JK)

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THE PERSONAL AND SOCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF TELEVISION AS PERCEIVED BY COLLEGE STUDENTS

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The development of cassette television, along with the potentially diversified services of cable television, offers a near future free from the present restrictions on program choice. As one writer noted:

> Video cassette systems have the potential to change drastically our entertainment habits. Basic to the concept is consumer freedom in visual entertainment; starting possibly this year, we should be able to buy or rent -- much like we obtain books today -- feature films, filmed stage plays, documentaries, technical demonstration films, films of recent historical events -- all to be viewed at home, on TV sets, wall screens, or similar units.[1]

The possibility of viewer selection as the basic criterion in the distribution of televised communication will bring about significant changes in the current concepts of mass communication. "The great potential in cassette television ... is its diversity, the fact that these mass-produced audio-visual packages can reach segmented markets, not depending on mass distribution."[2]

Of equal significance, however, is the fact that the television viewer will carry into this new communications age those perceptions and attitudes he develops during the time when network television determines his programming. Thus, it is more important than ever to understand those basic reactions which characterize the viewer's response to present-day television in order to assess more adequately his future response.

The effects of television have been the subject of research for many years. While the classic studies of Schramm[3] and Himmelwaite[4] were concerned with television's effect on children, other

research efforts such as Klapper[5] and Steiner[6] were more of a broad survey type. Still other efforts were of an eclectic and speculative nature such as Skornia[7], Sunderlein and Grey[8].

This study is part of a continuing series designed to explore those attitudes and values found in personal perceptions about televised communication. The general objective is to reveal those broad and identifiable patterns of response which typify the viewer's personal judgments about television. The specific objective of this study* is analysis of the social contributions of television as perceived by the first year college student, the 18-20 year old who is not far removed from high school graduation.

The Test Instrument

A survey was taken during the week of December 11, 1970, among 883 students present in approximately 65 sections of the university required basic speech course. Using a questionnaire booklet and accompanying answer sheet, the survey was conducted in each classroom by the instructor during the regular class period. The average student took ten minutes to respond to all the questions.

The questionnaire entitled, "Television and Your Personal Life," was divided into three sections. The first section of six questions sought basic demographic information on age, class level, sex, major, hometown size, and intended career.

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*A number of the concepts contained in this survey are credited to a similar study conducted by Japan's NHK Public Opinion Research Institute using the personal interview method. The results of their survey may be found in NHK Today and Tomorrow, June, 1970, pp. 5-11.

The second section of ten questions sought broad opinions about television's general contribution to the respondent's personal life and social activity. The selection of answers provided for responses ranging from extreme affirmation to extreme negation, as well as the option, "Don't know," in most cases. This section asked these questions, requiring only one response:

How do you generally feel about viewing television? (a) Always useful, (b) Sometimes useful, etc.

How useful is television to your home and personal life? (a) Extremely useful, etc.

How useful is television, directly or indirectly to your work or study? (a) Frequently useful, etc.

Why do you watch television? (a) Enjoyment only, (b) Enjoyment and learning, etc.

To what degree is television enjoyable? (a) More enjoyable than anything else, etc.

Are you being influenced by television in one way or another? - Which influence, good or bad, is greater? (a) Good influence is greater, etc.

How much has television contributed to general participation and interest in U.S. politics? (a) TV has assisted the democratic process greatly, etc.

How much has television contributed to raising the cultural level of the U.S.? (a) Very much, etc.

It has been said that morals and social order have declined. How far do you think television is responsible for such a decline? (a) I don't think that there has been a decline. (b) TV is very responsible for a decline, etc.

How do you select what you watch on television? (a) I watch only the programsI want to see, etc.

The third section provided for multiple and specific responses to four general questions related to the personal usefulness of television, its good and bad influence on society, and the effect of TV commercials. There were twelve optional responses provided for each of the first two questions concerned with the usefulness and the good social influence of television. The question of television's bad social influence offered thirteen options. There were four options provided for response to the perceived effects of television commercials.

Findings

The instrument's reliability was established by a consistency check in which a respondent who gave contradictory answers was eliminated from the sample. The questionnaire offered a total of 52 possible responses, providing 50 combinations which were logically inconsistent. Of the 883 in the sample, 19.3% (165) had inconsistent or ambivalent attitudes towards the television medium or the questionnaire. The reported findings in this study are based on those 718 respondents who displayed logical consistency.

The second section of ten questions provided a general attitudinal profile. The answers to the first question in this section, "How do you generally feel about viewing television?", indicated a pattern of response that was prevalent for the whole survey. Although the scale of answers offered the opportunity for a qualifying negative for each positive response, (i.e. sometimes useful, sometimes wasteful), most respondents positive in

their answers. The positive response (e.g. "useful") was checked, rather than the negative (e.g. "wasteful"). However, most respondents avoided absolutes, choosing a middle course by checking answers qualified with "sometimes," "to a certain extent," etc. Of the 718 respondents, 74.1% (532) indicated that television was "sometimes useful." Only seven marked that television was "sometimes wasteful."

How useful is television to your home and social life? Over 66.6% (478) of the respondents felt that television had only limited usefulness in their homes or social life. 29.8% (214) indicated that television was simply "useful."

Is television useful, directly or indirectly to your work or study? The largest response, 32.2% (231), indicated that television is "rarely useful." However, 26.2% (188) respondents felt television to be "sometimes useful" while 13.2% (95) checked that TV "sometimes interferes." Of the total, 14.9% (107) felt that "there is no relation between work, study and television."

Consistent with the findings of Steiner over a decade ago, television remains primarily a source of entertainment. The question, Why do you watch television?, revealed that 32.6% (234) watched TV for "enjoyment only," while 65.5% (470) viewed for "enjoyment and learning." The response to the next question, To what degree is television enjoyable?, was qualified, however, by the 74.2% (533) who checked off "It is more enjoyable to do other things, but viewing television also gives me pleasure." 11.6% (83)

indicated that television was "equally enjoyable" with other things, while 12.7% (91) marked that "viewing television is better than doing nothing, but it is no more than killing time."

Are you being influenced by television in one way or another? Which influence, good or bad, is greater? 34.0% (244) felt that television had both a good and a bad influence in the same proportions, while 20.1% (144) noted that TV had no influence on them personally. 19.6% (141) marked the answer that the "Good influence was greater," and 19.4% (139) did not know.

In response to the question, How much television has contributed to general participation and interest in U.S. politics?, 52.6% (378) gave the qualified response, "TV has assisted the democratic process to a certain extent." Nearly one-fourth, 24.0% (172) of the respondents marked the statement, "TV has assisted the democratic process greatly."

The question, How much has television contributed to raising the cultural level of the U.S.?, found 55.2% (396) indicating that "TV has been raising the level to a certain extent. 13.9% (100) marked the negative statement, "TV has been lowering the level to a certain extent."

The next question was preceded by a statement, "It has been said that morals and social order have declined." How far do you think television is responsible for such a decline? The responses indicated that 48.6% (349) did not know. 29% (208) respondents marked, "I don't think that there has been a moral decline." 18.1%

(130) checked the response, "TV has improved morals and social order."

High selectivity characterized the answers to the question, How do you select what you watch on television? 53.6% (385) marked, "I watch only the programs I want to see," while 38.4% (276) marked "I watch programs I want to see as well as others." Only 6% (43) indicated "I watch mainly with no definite choice in mind," and .8% (6) did not know how they selected their programs.

The third section of the survey offered a variety of possible responses to four general questions, including "No pertinent item," and "Don't know." All answers to these questions are noted since a low frequency of response may be as indicative of attitude as a high. The responses are described in descending order of percentages, rather than the sequential order of the questionnaire.

How is television useful to you?

TV offers entertainment	86.5%	(621)
TV enriches topics for conversation	47.4%	(340)
TV broadens my social views	30.5%	(219)
TV offers escape from my personal problems	28.4%	(204)
TV shows me how to accept and deal with important political and social problems	15.9%	(114)
Useful for improving my living skills, such as selection of clothing, housing, and diet	12.1%	(87)
Useful for a happy family life	11.7%	(84)

TV enriches my taste and cultural level	10.0%	(72)
TV helps me to socialize more easily	9.7%	(70)
There is no pertinent item	5.4%	(39)
Don't have any opinion on any of these items	1.7%	(12)
Useful in increasing understanding in our family	1.5%	(11)

How would you assess the influence of television on U.S. society?
Good influence:

TV has satisfied a public need for entertainment	72.4%	(520)
Interest in political and social problems has been stimulated	60.6%	(435)
TV has offered harmless escape from the problems of modern living	30.9%	(222)
Democratic values and behavior concerning political and social problems have been learned	26.3%	(189)
Knowledge and cultural levels have been raised	24.5%	(176)
Sensitivity to beautiful and good things has been improved	17.4%	(125)
Living habits, such as regarding clothing, diet, and housing has been improved	13.0%	(93)
Improvement of human relations in the family (such as between parents and children) have been promoted	10.6%	(76)
The ability to think things through has been improved	7.8%	(56)
No especially good influence has resulted	7.8%	(56)
Individuality has been enriched	6.0%	(43)
Don't know	3.6%	(26)

How would you assess the influence of television on U.S. society?

Bad influence:

Encouraged too much desire for entertainment instead of constructive activities	39.6%	(284)
Individuality has been lost	26.6%	(191)
The ability to think things through has been weakened	22.7%	(163)
Encouraged public escapism from real social problems	21.2%	(152)
Worthwhile aspects of family relations have been lost	19.8%	(142)
There was no especially bad influence	16.0%	(115)
Sensitivity to the beautiful and good has been dulled	15.5%	(111)
Wrong thinking and behavior about political and social problems have been encouraged	13.9%	(100)
Desirable individual social attitudes have been frustrated	12.7%	(91)
The normal happy family life has been made uninteresting	12.0%	(86)
Don't know	8.4%	(60)
Interest in political and social problems has been discouraged	1.8%	(13)
Poor living habits, such as in clothing, diet and housing standards, have been encouraged	1.3%	(9)

Regarding the use of TV commercials:

The use of TV commercials has aroused public demand for unnecessary products	65.5%	(470)
The use of TV commercials for promoting political candidates has discouraged clear understanding of the issues	47.9%	(344)

The use of TV commercials has encouraged the development of false standards of social behavior	46.2%	(332)
The use of TV commercials for promoting political candidates has encouraged clear understanding of the issues	16.3%	(117)

Summary and Conclusion

The overall response indicated a generally favorable attitude towards television's personal and social contributions. However, there were clearly severe criticisms for the perceived role of the television commercial in arousing public demand for unnecessary products, discouraging understanding of political issues, and encouraging the development of false standards of social behavior.

By combining different responses under general categories, some patterns emerge. Television is still considered a personal entertainment medium by 85.6 percent with 72.4 percent indicating that it satisfies a public need for entertainment. The escapism aspect of TV entertainment was perceived as a personal phenomenon by 28.4 percent while 30.9 percent felt it offered harmless public escape from the problems of modern life. 39.6 percent indicated some negativism by noting that it encouraged too much desire for entertainment instead of more constructive activities.

Noteworthy was the response to television's contribution to the understanding and appreciation of social problems. 30.5 percent felt that TV broadens their personal social views, and 60.6 percent indicated that general interest in political and social problems is

stimulated. However, the attitudes toward televised commercials also revealed negative responses with 65.5 percent feeling that TV commercials arouse demand for unnecessary products, 47.9 percent noting that political commercials discourage clear understanding of issues, and 46.2 percent charging that commercials encourage the development of false standards of social behavior.

Small percentages also serve as indicators of attitude. Only 15.9 percent checked that television showed them how to accept and deal with important political and social problems, while 26.3 percent noted that democratic values and behavior concerning political and social problems have been learned. Television assisted the ability to think things through for only 7.8 percent. Only 1.8 percent went so far as to indicate that interest in political and social problems had actually been discouraged.

The statements concerning the utility of television to improve personal and family social norms received little support. Most positive responses to the improvement of living and social skills, happy family life, taste, knowledge, culture, etc., ranged below 20 percent. The negative responses ranged from a high of 26.6 percent indicating that individuality had been lost to 22 percent noting that thought ability had been weakened, and 21.2 percent that television had encouraged public escapism. Negative responses to statements relating to loss of taste, knowledge, the worthwhile aspects of family relations, etc., ranged generally below 20 percent.

Further studies are necessary to refine more clearly these general attitudes and values. Questions arise as to what is perceived as harmful, harmless or constructive entertainment, constructive as opposed to entertaining activities, or as the problem-solving capacities of television. Much more needs to be known about the perceived role of commercial television in developing critical abilities, standards of taste, and cultural norms.

While the perceived role of television may differ considerably from its actual function, such perception plays an important part in deciding individual response. It is in the perceived role that clues may be found to indicate response to a future where the viewer will be the primary source of programming alternatives rather than the television network.

Footnotes

[1]Anthony Monahan, "The Coming Cassette Revolution," Midwest Magazine of the Chicago Sun-Times, March 7, 1971, p. 10.

[2]Ibid., p. 15.

[3]Wilbur Schramm, Television in the Lives of Our Children (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1961).

[4]Hilde T. Himmelwaite, Television and the Child (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

[5]Joseph T. Klapper, The Effects of Mass Communication (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1960).

[6]Gary A. Steiner, The People Look at Television (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963).

[7]Harry J. Skornia, Television and Society (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965).

[8]Sylvia Sunderlein and Nan Gray, Children and TV, Television's Impact on the Child, Bulletin 21 A, Assn. for Childhood Education International, 3615 Wisconsin Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20016. ERIC abstract ED 013666